

wedding canopy

3 November 1992
Shaare Zion Sisterhood

Intro: What I have for you today is less a book review than it is the story of a best-selling and critically acclaimed book, and some comments on the art and practice of writing. The title of my review *cum* biography is:

The Lives of Lives of the Saints

I'm in an oddly privileged and yet just plain awkward position ^{when I talk about} ~~to be discussing~~ Lives of the Saints because Nino Ricci expresses gratitude toward me on the copyright page of the novel, ^{claiming} ~~and claims~~ that I "helped bring this book to fruition" and that my "criticisms helped shape it."

So you can see ~~that~~ my difficulty ^{is} ~~is~~ ^{multiple} ~~is~~: Nino is a friend--and a gracious friend at that, one who has given me far more credit than I deserve for his achievement. ^{yet,} ~~And~~ if you take him at his word about my contribution, then I have to shoulder ^{like a particularly close uncle in a small family} ~~part of the blame for the book's weaknesses.~~ ^{when this literary child says this literary child "turned out"} ~~part of the blame for the book's weaknesses.~~ ^{doesn't act the way we want it to.}

Writers, editors and advisors often have a parental relation ^{like children,} to their books. We bear them, nurture them, suffer them, love them, train them--and then they leave us and it all too often seems that they're not our children at all, that someone else found this child floating in a reed basket and raised it to become an unruly stranger. And books, when they are released from an author's control into the world, can also become unruly strangers. They develop new histories with new people and our previous certainties about them become clouded. A writer can hear a stranger describe his book and not recognize in it a word

of the book that the author thought ^{he} had written.

The comparison between children and books isn't a completely frivolous one.

We share with our children an extraordinarily intricate and protracted history--a history that is a narrative or story in itself. Inevitably, our children remember a somewhat different history from the one we do, just as our notion of family history diverges from that of our parents. And I think it's partly these differing understandings of our own life stories that make us individuals.

The writing of a book begins with an act of conception that signals the start of its history. The germ that will become the book meets the deed of actually committing words to a page. In the case of many novels, the first result is discarded. ^{it doesn't take} Sometimes, the first several drafts of a book wind up in the recycle bin. Then, often, there occurs a kind of fertilization, at which point the process of development suddenly changes. The writer discovers *what the book is about* and begins to rewrite it not as though he were developing an idea, but more as though he were following one. The resulting work--for better or for worse--is the fruit of this push and pull that goes on between the writer and the manuscript. And it bears the marks of its own history. The way you read a book is distinguished from the way the book's author reads it because she or he remembers the book's history, along with his or her own history. The author might even recall passages as being in the book that were really part of an earlier draft but got thrown out in the final

version. Perhaps the editors said that the book was good but they could afford to publish it only if the author cut its length by 20%. And always, the author knows ^{imagination and resolution} the world that the book was modelled on, knows it so well that the model and its literary equivalent become confused in the author's mind.

Then, you or I, the book's potential readers come along, we open the book, and we discover this literary child as though it were born whole and mature, ^{already dressed & holding down a good job} a work of art whose conception and execution didn't involve countless compromises, disputes and many long nights of despair, but as an authoritatively bound, aggressively promoted, flawlessly typeset piece of literary art, delivered to the earth whole and perfect.

Simply, books have lives of their own because everyone reads them differently. We capture them and understand them in this coarsely woven net we call language, and meanings, free of the author's personal relation the book, are at liberty to come and go almost--but not quite--as they please.

I can think of a couple of anecdotes that demonstrate this curious relation between artists and their art:

KENT THOMPSON STORY--A SENSE OF AN ENDING. A story without a history because he's not aware of having made it.

FRED PICKER STORY--VERMONT SCULPTOR. A history that comes with the raw materials.

~~Now,~~ you've patiently allowed me to go far afield before swinging back to discuss *Lives of the Saints*. The reason I've

as I said

touched on these areas is because, ^{as I said} Nino has cast me as the book's uncle. Nino wrote it while he was a student in the M.A. Creative Writing Program at Concordia University, under my supervision. I must have read *Lives of the Saints*, which, by the way, was then called *Rita*, four or five times in draft and I have to confess that I read the final, much shorter version of the published book only a few weeks ago.

When Nino Ricci first approached me and asked me to supervise his thesis, I wasn't particularly impressed with his work. He was (and still is) a tall, congenial young man with a slow laugh and a calm sort of reticence that, for a short time at least, masks his talent and intelligence. His short stories--~~at least~~, those that I saw--were tangled, Gothic, frequently murky things that presented the confusing trials of a young man travelling through Europe and North Africa. It was in many ways, typical student work--uneven prose, suggestive but not demonstrative of meaning, and still uncertain of subject and voice. And by voice, I mean the language, tone and distance with and from which the characters and events are viewed. Again, like student work, it was clearly still searching for itself.

In retrospect, though, I can see that his work was very concerned with sex roles. The North African story showed women doing their work in the literal shadows and, I imagine, by extension, in the figurative shadows of a male-dominated culture. A Paris story was filled with ambiguity about the central character's sexual identity. I also remember Beth Harvor, another very accomplished writer who was in Concordia's

Creative Writing Program then--Beth's fiction and poetry have appeared in *The New Yorker*, her last collection of fiction was called, *I Wish We Could Drive Like this Forever*--telling me that Nino was extremely interested in understanding women in relation to social role and she sent him off to read the Doris Lessing, a British, feminist writer--who he found interesting, but not particularly helpful.

Then, the early drafts of *Lives of the Saints* started showing up in my mailbox at Concordia.. The first-person narrator--that is, the person telling the story--sounded to me like someone out of a Boris Karloff movie. The voice was heavy and melodramatic and, whether or not I'm remembering this accurately, I can't say, the story was permeated with that sense of familiar dark mystery that thunderstorms, haunted pasts produce in second-rate melodrama--a sort of "Dark Shadows" with a degree in literature.

While he wrote the book, Nino was living what might be considered a typical graduate student's life, although perhaps a little tougher than most. He is a born writer, and by that I mean that he seems to have been born with a writer's work habits. Then, as now, he deliberately structured his days so that his main activity was writing, which he approached with a greater sense of commitment and responsibility than most people approach their 9-5 jobs. However, writers of novels don't make salaries and Nino had to squeeze in several hours at the typewriter, classwork, and part-time jobs, and he seemed often on the fly to or from some short-term job teaching English to

foreign-language students.

The book that Nino wound up writing had bits and pieces of all the concerns that had been informing his stories. It was set in central Italy after the Second World War, in a small farming village called Valle del Sole (that is, Valley of the Sun) that was, technologically, a 19th century village--a place without electricity or running water--and in many ways, intellectually and socially a village from the middle ages, ruled by ancient superstition, the dictates of the Roman church and, of course, its own small-town jealousies, fears and resentments. Valle del Sole was far from ignorant of the world, however, for many of its men moved to France or Switzerland to find work and send money home, and some went to America (As we know, to many Europeans, the term "America" refers to the land mass roughly between Hudson's Bay and Tierra del Fuego in southern Chile) and disappeared, or failed and returned to Valle del Sole, or succeeded, and sent for their families.

Lives of the Saints--M.A. Thesis and novel--chronicles the life and trials of an intelligent, sophisticated almost self-destructively stubborn woman from Valle del Sole, Cristina Innocente, a person who needs more freedom than her world can provide. Cristina's husband, Mario, has moved to a part of America known in Valle del Sole as "the sun parlour," where it's rumoured that he's living a miserable existence in a farmer's chicken coop. Cristina's life is in suspension. Her absent husband, who in our terms would be considered a spoiled and abusive brute of a man, may or may not send for her. In the

deal with
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peoples

meantime, Cristina must raise their son, Vittorio, and find ways to meet her emotional and sexual needs in an environment that's not at all sympathetic to her pursuit of these things outside marriage. In Valle del Sole, all people, but particularly women, are subject to the grinding and deforming notions of role and self that have been imposed on them by their customs and institutions.

Although the book is concerned with the life and trials of Cristina Innocente, it's told from the standpoint of the adult Vittorio, looking back on his childhood, which was often hidden in the shadow of events in the lives of his mother and of their village. ^{A reason of waiting. Old life, new life} We learn next to nothing about Vittorio's present life in this book (Did I forget to say that *Lives of the Saints* is the first novel of a trilogy?), but his memories are highly and curiously coloured by a few things, such as his sexual attraction to his mother ... but more on that later.

When *Lives of the Saints* was completed as a Masters thesis, Nino had to appear before his readers to "defend" the thesis. I remember that the notion of defense was really a misnomer, because his readers--all of whom were writers as well as academics--were fascinated with the book, and spent far more time praising than questioning.

One of the readers was the poet Gary Geddes, who had single-handedly established and nurtured one of Canada's most important small publishing houses--Quadrant Editions, which had by that time mutated into a larger and more successful press called

Cormorant. After the defence, Gary told Nino that Cormorant would be happy to publish the book, but he generously suggested that Nino, as people in the trade say, shop it around. Later, I suggested the same thing. I was confident that he could get a lucrative deal at one of the larger publishing houses.

Well, here begins one of those odd stories that give people a paranoid vision of the publishing industry as an old boy's (I ^{and increasingly} ~~imagine some day, I'll also be able to say~~ Old girl's) club. Nino dutifully sent the book around to publisher after publisher, and publisher after publisher promptly returned it to him. Nino had moved to Toronto during this time, and occasional and unattested stories that he was starving, selling his blood, and participating in experiments of pharmaceuticals that left him narcotized when he wasn't in the lab, would find their way back to Montreal. The only thing I knew for sure was that he was still writing 8 hours a day.

Then, after having made the rounds of all the major publishers, and being rejected by every one, Nino got back in touch with Gary Geddes, or with his wife, Jan, who was now running Cormorant and *Lives of the Saints* was accepted for publication. On the back-cover, praise for the book includes a warm note from Timothy Findley, one of Canada's best-known fiction writers. Gary told me that one of the editors who had rejected *Lives* said that if he had known Findley liked the book, his publishing house would have taken it without hesitation.

It's dispiriting to think that books are published not on

their own merits so much as the praise of people with proven marketability. My own feeling is that quality writing will always find a market, but Nino's experience, I'm afraid, seems to underline my naivete.

Perhaps this wasn't such a bad start for the book, though, because it made a very marketable story. *Lives of the Saints* didn't take long to make best-seller lists all across the country, and MacLean's ran a story about the failure of editorial and academic wisdom in Nino's case, even dredging up a story that one of Nino's earlier writing teachers, W.O. Mitchell no less, had confidently asserted that Nino just didn't have what it took to be a writer.

As a product, *Lives of the Saints* was a phenom. Its sales contributed to the success of Cormorant books, repaid Nino for at least part of his years of work, and eventually translated into a number of awards, including the Governor-General's Award and the Books in Canada/W.H. Smith Awards for Fiction. *Lives of the Saints* came out in a British edition, I assume it's been translated (The last time I spoke to Nino, he was on his way to or from an international book fair in Germany, and I've heard talk about movie options having been taken out), and I think it mightt *still* be on some best-seller lists even though its now two or three years old. Nino himself, amazed not only at the success of the book, but also the longevity of its success, said, a while back, "What's wrong with people? Aren't they reading anything else?" And it doesn't stop there. Have you seen these wonderfully understated GAP clothing ads, where we see a

star wearing a rumpled cotton T-shirt and Levis, and the ad copy in the corner says T-shirt by GAP. \$60? GAP approached Nino and asked if he would appear in one of those ads, and decorate the sides of TTC buses throughout Toronto. Nino--good for him--declined.

I have to insert a writerly note here, just in case this is producing visions of sugar plums in the heads of writers in the audience. Even if Nino made \$50,000 from this book (this is a figure I've plucked out of the air because I have no idea of the actual amount), don't forget that, amortized over the 5 years it took to write it, the author is still scratching around below the poverty line.

Although the location of the American "sun parlour" where Vittorio Innocente's father is alleged to live in a chicken coop isn't actually given in this first volume of the *Saints* trilogy, it may well be the Niagara Peninsula, which encloses the Leamington, Ontario, area, where Nino grew up.

To the surprise of many readers, *Lives of the Saints'* success at creating a believable world in rural, post-war Italy is more an act of imagination than of experience. Nino is Canadian-born, and had visited Italy only once or twice before writing the book.

Valle del Sole is purely a novelist's world, whipped up from details Nino received from Italian immigrants when he conducted a survey of immigration patterns for the government of Ontario, (In fact, whole Italian villages move to new-world locations,

reconstituting themselves in locations from Buenos Aires to Toronto) heard from his family, rescued from books and, as I said, gleaned from a few brief visits to Italy.

Here, from the opening chapter of *Lives of the Saints*, is the world Nino concocted from his sources:

If this story has a beginning, a moment at which a single gesture broke the surface of events like a stone thrown into the sea, the ripples cresting away endlessly, then that beginning occurred on a hot July day in the year 1960, in the Village of Valle del Sole, when my mother was bitten by a snake.

Valle del Sole--which was not in a valley at all, but perched on the north face of Colle di Papa about three thousand feet above the valley floor--had no culinary specialities, no holy sights, no ancient ruins; forgotten and unsung, it was one of a hundred villages just like it flung across the Italian Apennines like scattered stones. Its main street, via san Giuseppe, came down a mile or so from the high road before carving a sharp S through the village centre and ending at a 200 foot drop at the village's edge; and that July afternoon, the street was deserted, the women and children walled up in their houses, the shutters closed against the flies and heat, the men out in the fields, which they had departed for before dawn and from which they would not return until after nightfall.

But in our house there were no men to go out and work the fields. My father--a native not a Valle del Sole but of nearby Castilucci, Valle del Sole's age-old rival--had emigrated to America almost four years before, when I was barely three; and my grandfather, my mother's father, in whose house we lived, had been crippled during the first war, one leg, its bone crushed on the battlefield by a horse's hoof, left shorter than the other, and his calves scarred and pitted from the damage a grenade had done. He lived now on a government pension, and on the rent he collected from a few hectares of olives and vineyards; and in the village he was known simply as *lu podestà*, the mayor, because he had held that position unchallenged since the time of the Fascists.

That "single gesture [which breaks] the surface of events like a stone thrown into the sea" is the brilliant germ of the book because it contains the pattern for all the grief that's to

follow.

Near the beginning of *Lives*, the boy, Vittorio, has just fallen asleep with a book in his hand when, the narrator says:

I was awakened by a muffled shout.

The shout--it had sounded like a man's--had come from the direction of our stable, which on the street side of the house was buried in the slope the house was cut into but on the valley side opened out at ground level. I set down my book and bounded down the crooked stone stairway at the side of the house that led down to it; but when I rounded the corner at the bottom of the steps I stopped short. The stable door was closed, but through a crack at the bottom of it a small, tapered head was flicking its tongue: a snake. I had seen it just in time; now I stood frozen as it slithered a long, slim green through the crack in the door and disappeared down a row of tomatoes in my mother's garden, a gentle rustling of leaves leading finally to the ravine formed at the edge of my grandfather's property by years of run-off from *la fonte di capre*...

But while I had been staring after the path of the snake, someone had cracked open the door of the stable. Two dark eyes were staring down at me now from the shadows concentrating their energies on me as if to make me disappear by force of will. I was about to turn and run when the stable door opened a few inches further and the two eyes suddenly swooped out of the stable like swallows, turning magically a luminous blue as they caught the sunlight, brief flames that held me transfixed and seemed to burn away all other features of the figure swooping down on me. I stumbled backwards and fell, my arms coming up instinctively to shield me against a blow; but the blow did not come, and in a moment the sound of cracking twigs told me that something had followed the snake into the ravine.

The young Vittorio watches a small figure scrambling up a distant slope, getting into a car, and driving away. Inside the barn, he discovers his mother, Cristina, feeding the pigs "as if nothing had happened"--although she is pulling straw from her hair as well. Still, she crouches down in front of her son and, hard-eyed, asks, "What did you see when you came down here?"

At this, Vittorio thinks for a moment of his catechism, the

rigid set of questions and answers that embody Catholic dogma as taught to school children, and divines the correct answer. "I didn't see anything," he says.

However, moments later, they discover blood on Cristina's leg and it becomes clear that she has been bitten by a snake. A horrific and comic series of scenes follow: Being driven with his mother to the hospital in a provincial town, bribing the nurse on duty for prompt treatment while others in the waiting room watch as her leg becomes grotesquely swelled and her breathing more laboured and speculate with interest on the colour and direction of movement of the snake that bit her, and of the meaning of those symbols.

For the moment, though, no one foresees that Cristina's snake bite and her involvement with the blue-eyed stranger will become the flashpoint for conflict between Cristina's needs and the values that grow from the villagers' poverty, isolation, repressive Christianity, and latent paganism.

I mentioned before that this adult narrator, recounting his own past, tips his hand at a few points. I took the next paragraph out of the passage I just read--it comes just after the boy sees the snake--to discuss it separately. It provides one of those glimpses over the edge of the narrator's--or perhaps even the author's--cards, that for me, is really problematical.

Snakes, in Valle del Sole, [the narrator says] had long been imbued with special meaning. Some of the villagers

believed they were immortal, because they could shed their skin, and at planting time, to improve their harvest, they would buy a powder made of ground snake skins from *la strega di Belmonte* and spread it over their fields. Others held that a snake crossing you from the right brought good fortune, from the left, bad, or that a brown snake was evil while a green one was good. But there was a saying in Valle de Sole, '*Do' l'orgoglio sta, la serpe se ne va*,'--where pride is the snake goes--and there were few who doubted that snakes, whatever their other properties, were agents of the evil eye, which the villagers feared more than any mere Christian deity or devil, and which they guarded themselves against scrupulously, by wearing amulets of garlic or wolves' teeth and by posting goat horns above their doorways.

Do you notice the cool, almost anthropological tone of this information? It has the feel not of lived experience, but of acquired information. And if we think about it, it's hard not to ask a couple of obvious questions. Vittorio is six at the time of the story. How can the adult Vittorio, the narrator, remember all this detail? Is the adult parroting rather than recalling the information? If so, can we trust *anything* he says about the past.

On the other hand, that distance that I characterized as "anthropological" might come from the fact that Nino Ricci learned about the people of Central Italy from books and second-hand reports, and that *his* relation to these people, this time and place, is that of an anthropologist doing field research. It may be that Nino is just stretching the literary convention that allows us to believe all the detail that first-person past tense stories usually give us and ask us to accept as accurate and fair.

I'm not really sure about this, but it was an impediment to

my pleasure in the book. The adult narrator is always *there* but he's no more visible than a backlit figure behind a sheet on stage while the play goes on in front of and almost independent of him. Sometimes, as in the paragraph I quoted, the narrator comments but, I ask myself, *Should I trust him? Will the next two volumes reveal that I've been a participant in an elaborate game, and that this narrator has been far less reliable than he appears?*

My timid guess is that most of you who have read the book feel I'm asking too much because, in so many ways, *Lives of the Saints* is utterly convincing and easy to get lost in. For instance, the scene which brings Cristina to the hospital is filled with drama and a rather dry comedy as a local cafe owner by the name of Di Lucci energetically drives Cristina, her father, and Vittorio from Valle del Sole to the hospital in nearby Rocca Seca:

'For God's sake, Andò, there's no need to kill us all," my grandfather said, but Di Lucci did not let up on his speed, relying on his horn to warn in time whatever lay in wait around corners. He brushed off now a close call with a peasant and his hay-laden mule.

"Damn peasants," he said. "Most of them have never seen a car before." Through the back window I saw the mules wizened owner raise an angry fist after us.

Di Lucci took his eyes off the road now to shoot a quick sidelong glance into the back seat.

"What colour was the snake?" he asked, a little breathless.

"Green," I said, without thinking.

"Green? You saw it too. Well, green is better than brown. Did it come from the right or the left?"

Di Lucci was up on his snake lore.

"Never mind about your superstitions," my grandfather said. "What do you know about snakes?"

"Giuseppe *lu forestier*," like I was telling you--

"We don't want to hear about Giuseppe *lu forestier*'."

"Beh, scusate, I just thought--"

"Just think about your driving."

Di Lucci remained silent for a moment, putting his energies into frightening a flock of sheep to the side of the road, his hand leaning on his horn. We trundled past the sheep just as their shepherd, thrashing out wildly with his staff, beat the last of them into single file against the mountain face. But now Di Lucci was ready for another volley.

"Where did it bite you?"

My mother let out a sigh.

Ando, you heard me say just a few minutes ago. On the ankle."

"Yes, of course, on the ankle, but where were you when it bit you on the ankle?"

"Too close to a snake." [she said]

Would a six year old attend to all of that and remember it in such extraordinary detail? No way. Are passages like this common in literature? Fairly. Am I satisfied? No.

In fact, I think the novel's weakest--or most provocative--point is the liberty that it takes with the six-year-old's point of view. Remember earlier, I mentioned something about the boy's, or the adult narrator's Oedipal attention to his mother? Here are some examples:

At the water, which was swollen from the rains, we waded for a while along the shore, the hem of my mother's skirt catching the water and clinging to her thighs, translucent...

or

My mother and I bathed together in the pool, my mother letting her dress fall casually to the cave floor and standing above me for a moment utterly naked, smooth and sleek, as if she had just peeled back an old layer of skin...

or

I decided finally it had been my father now who'd made me move out of my mother's bed, as if in some strange way he was able to control my life and see into it from whatever world he lived in across the sea...

or

She wore a thick black sweater, its sleeves pushed up above her elbows, that caught her curves as she worked, now the roundness of her breasts as she reached up to brush a strand of hair away from her eyes with the back of her hand, now the feline curve of her back as she arched over the rolling board.

This narrator, this adult story-teller, sounds as though he's *right there now*, responding sexually to his mother.

My guess is that Nino actually wants us to be uncomfortable with this part of story because he's introducing themes that will be developed in the last two books of the trilogy.

Again, my reading is distracted by insider information. When he was my student, Nino wrote a brilliant paper about a novel by Vladimir Nabokov called *Pnin*, and in *Pnin*, in typical, obsessively playful Nabokovian fashion, a rather sad Russian expatriate professor named Pnin flees his job at an American university because of the presence of an old rival. The old rival, however, appears to be Pnin himself and, moreover, he's also the narrator of the novel *Pnin* itself. This novel is, among other things, an optical, or literary illusion, that reminds us of the ironic, visually possible but physically impossible

drawings of the Dutch artist Maurits Escher. Where does this stairwell begin? we ask of Escher drawings. Where does it end? Where does it go?

Such work, however, always takes a big chance. Ultimately, we don't want to feel that the story was an extended joke on us, a broad wink over our heads. *Lives of the Saints* magnifies my uncertainty with its playful use of names. Think of Cristina Innocente--innocent Christian--or Vittorio Innocente--victorious Christian, or of a man named Darcangelo--archangel--who befriends Cristina and her son for example. In addition, the book virtually hisses at ius with its esses and its sinuous snake shapes. We encounter them in s-shaped roads that open like the snake of a mouth; and people, as we saw in the earlier passage, shuck their skins as easily as reptiles.

My nervousness aside, *Lives of the Saints* skilfully follows the moment of Cristina's being bitten by a green snake, through its consequence (Di Lucci gets suspicious about what she was doing in the barn at that time of day; villagers talk; indiscretions are witnessed) of Cristina's being shunned by the villagers, Vittorio's harassment by his friends, family strife, and Mario's, Vittorio's father's, command that his family should leave Valle del Sole, board a ship, and join him in the sun parlour.

The problem is that by this time, Cristina is about 8 months pregnant--the aftermath of the morning in the barn when she was bitten by the snake--and she must endure a difficult ocean

crossing to get to America and either begin a new life or shuck off her old one. It's in this part of the book that events are the most harrowing and unrelenting--partly because the boy is more active, less a mute, recording presence in the story and more an actor in his own right.

These pleasures, and the book's ending, I'll leave for you to discover.

Lives of the Saints has had lives of its own other than those I've mentioned so far. If we look at it as "immigrant literature," it's distinctly Canadian, despite Nino's assertion that, since he grew up close to Detroit, many of his most important cultural influences are American.

In American immigrant literature, life tends to start some time after people have been processed through Ellis Island. The new world is *the* world, and the old world remains as an accent, a dialect, a mannerism, a quaint family memory to the children who grow in the new land and see their parents' history as a land populated by ghosts. In Canadian immigrant writing, whether it be 19th century immigrants trying to shape the Ontario bush into a middle-class image of Britain, or a late 20th century immigrant from India whose stories haven't even *left* that country yet, the difference holds true. Think of Neil Bissoondath's *A Casual Brutality*, or Rohinton Mistry's Governor-Generals' Award winning *Such a Long Journey*...or Nino Ricci's *Lives of the Saints*. I think of novels being written by my own graduate students this year. In one, a daughter returns to the

remains of her parents' homeland of Yugoslavia; in another, the story is set in a Parsi community in northern India, even though the writer was born in North York. The authors of all these stories live in Canada, but the worlds of their fiction remain, at least partly, back in the old country.

In *Lives of the Saints*, Canada, is seen from the standpoint of Valle del Sole as an Edenic but undifferentiated world of cool forests and sooty factories, of tenements and blue lakes, and of freedom from want.

When...a young man returned from overseas to choose a bride, [the narrator tells us] the young women of the village primped and preened themselves, made potions, promenaded daily through the square, caught up in a dream of freedom, their every second word then a wistful "Ah-merr-ica"...

Freedom, of course, is Cristina Innocente's goal. Her son's--Vittorio's--goal isn't immediately clear, but he may also be searching for his freedom, and hoping to find it in memories or fantasies of Valle del sole, Rocca Secca, a tempestuous ocean crossing, and the birth of his sister, Rita, who was conceived at the same time her mother was bitten by a snake.

The final life of *Lives of the Saints* that I wanted to talk about touches many of its other lives. As I hope I've made clear, Nino has an abiding interest in the way role, tradition and religion can constrain our freedom, and particularly the freedom of women.

It's always been difficult, but not impossible, to write from, or close to, the point of view of those who are unlike us--whatever that us might be. Hard for a woman to write from the

point of view of men, a man from the point of view of a woman, an American from that of a Korean, the oppressor from the point of view of the oppressed.

In the current literary/political climate, Nino was taking a chance writing about the problems of a woman, even if the story is only located *close* to her, coming as it does from the point of view of her son. So, while the response to this novel has been almost universally favourable, it's no surprise that at least one voice has accused Nino of appropriating a "cultural property" of women.

A Montreal poet and story-writer, a woman, conducted a crusade against Nino for plagiarism. She charged, in effect, that stories of women and snakes were the exclusive cultural properties of women and that Nino was exercising something like gender imperialism, colonising the story of Cristina Innocente and her particular snake for his own uses--his own *male* uses. This crusade stopped before it became a public issue because the person pursuing it didn't receive much support from the institutions--such as English-language newspapers, publishers and the Writers Union of Canada--she took it to.

This final and overwhelming irony about writing books in general and *Lives of the Saints* in particular, is that the author's concerns, his intentions, don't count for much when the book is launched into the world. The writer William Gass has said that the first responsibility of a writer is "to create a world," a literary place with its own physics, history, sociology, art and individuals--something that Nino has done so

well that the issues that drive life in Valle del Sole have the power to slip effortlessly, like grown children, like ghosts-- back and forth between our world and theirs.